



Greetings Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France, and members of the Appropriations Committee. I am Rick Sebastian, President/CEO of The Kennedy Center, headquartered in Trumbull. The Kennedy Center is proud to celebrate our 70th year of supporting people who have disabilities. We provide a range of services including but not limited to residential, day and employment supports, as well as respite, social skill development for young adults on the Autism Spectrum and ABI services, transitioning supports for exiting school age students and we operate 7 lines of business to employ people who have disabilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on the state budget. Just as Evelyn Kennedy, our foundress, did in the late 1940's and beyond, I am here speaking before a legislative body about the inadequate funding system and mechanisms we have in Connecticut for our most vulnerable population. It is hard to believe that Evelyn's advocacy work is still as vitally important today as it was then. While we have made great strides in these 70 years, it is evident that our collective work is far from complete.

We are thankful that you advocated, fought for, and ensured additional funding in the budget for our workforce during the last session. We look forward to your continued commitments to ensuring adequate long-term funding and COLA commitments for our system and would echo the asks of our colleagues that your commitments be honored with additional fiscal supports during this session.

I am especially thankful and want to recognize the tireless work of Senator Osten and Representative Walker who wrote language into the budget bill which allows the not for profits to retain the PPP loan monies and not have them "clawed back" or cost settled by the state. Your actions have helped us to remain viable despite the many negative and ongoing impacts on our operations and for that, we are extremely grateful.

Equity has taken on a principal role in our community dialogue throughout the United States in the past couple of years. As a nation we grapple with fiscal, social, and public policy inequities, and are now recognizing value in vulnerable and historically marginalized populations. We need to ensure here in the state of Connecticut that funding equity becomes embedded into our public policy financing efforts for present and future growth and sustainment and not return to any time where the answer has been, "we just don't have the funding to support you."

As a leader in this sector and a taxpaying citizen, I am dismayed and exasperated that our vulnerable people, their families, and their exhausted and underpaid Direct Support Professionals, are not recognized in the Governor's budget as needing additional funding supports. We are invisible to the administration and to some in your respective chambers. What exactly will it take to eliminate this invisibility within the disability sector and have the people and the not-for-profit providers identified as critical resources for the State of CT? What will it take to reshape public financing practices to increase the financial value on the work being done on behalf of state government and what will it take to recognize that this work must be equitable to the same work of a state of CT employee? How much more pain, suffering, inequities, and injustices need to be levied on the exhausted provider network before transformational change is enacted?

Since March 13th, 2020, the not-for-profit provider community has shown up every day during the pandemic to provide critical, life enriching and, in some instances, lifesaving supports and services to the most vulnerable people in our state. We did not shut down and we used the innovation we have used

for decades to ensure vibrancy for communities of people. We did not have the safety of remote work, and we ensured that the necessary and requisite supplies to support and protect our workforce and to protect our service recipients were available. We remained committed to our constituents and continued to work, and we were present 24/7 to support people in need. And yet, the Governor and his administration have not valued that commitment by providing increased funding nor did they provide any amount for hazard pay, which as you know was included for state employees.

I'd like to highlight few significant crises that have had deleterious impacts on our sector and our people:

COVID - Since the pandemic began in 2020, The Kennedy Center has had 97 of the individuals we support diagnosed with COVID. Unfortunately, 6 of our individuals passed away. 185 of our employees have been diagnosed with COVID and more than 40 employees have family members who passed away from the virus.

Workforce Crisis (shortages) – Our sector is experiencing a major workforce crisis and one that will have lasting and negative impact on our people. We have approximately 125 vacancies, including 75 Direct Support Professional vacancies. We turned over more than 200 jobs in 2021 and the majority of those turnovers were wage related. We are unable to support more than 50 people on our waiting list, 15 of whom require one to one support because of medical or behavioral needs. These individuals remain out of service and are at home with family members, which then impacts their ability to maintain employment and sustain themselves financially. The economic loss to the state because these families are now out of the workforce must be evaluated in our broader state income numbers.

Wage inequities – Equal Pay for Equal Work - the starting rate for an entry level Direct Support Professional working in a state run group home is approximately \$25 per hour or \$52,000 annually. The starting rate for a DSP at The Kennedy Center and other not for profits like us is \$16.50. We are thankful that the legislature provided funds for us to raise the starting rates for DSPs in 2021 and again in 2022 to increase the rate to \$17.25 but we are far from equitable.

Loss of Non Profit Grant Program – For the past two years, the Governor has called for a “bond diet.” This loss of or absence of \$25Million in much needed grant dollars along with a decades long history of underfunding has left our infrastructures in dire straits. Continuation of this diet in this environment will create even more problems and challenges in the future as we are unable to meet the operational needs of organizations. How can we use some of the federal infrastructure resources to support the not for profit sector?

In closing, Doing the Right Thing is not easy, yet, very much needed. Each of you, our colleagues and each of us at The Kennedy Center, share a common bond; we value our constituents and strive to do right by them with each decision we make. I ask that you continue your commitments to our sector and we will work with you to ensure that the most vulnerable in each of our communities receive services and supports that can help them flourish.

Thank you for your work, commitments and attention.

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